

# Giants in the land? Billy Graham and John Paul II: Billy Graham and John Paul II

From the Editors in the [November 15, 2003](#) issue

Did a politically shrewd and theologically sophisticated Polish pope trigger the collapse of communism? Did an energetic and telegenic southern evangelist foster the resurgence of evangelical Christianity in the post-World War II era? These are extreme claims to make for any person. The fact that they can even be considered in the case of John Paul II and Billy Graham is a measure of these leaders' visibility and impact.

Mainline Protestants—and writers in this magazine—have not always had good things to say about John Paul or about Graham. Many have found Graham's social-political alliances dubious, and are wary of the mass evangelistic meetings that remain his signature ministry. They have been disappointed by John Paul's enforcement of his church's stance against women's ordination and birth control.

Yet, looking back on the two men's careers, now in their twilight—both are slowed by Parkinson's disease—their accomplishments, as well as the points of common Christian concern, are perhaps more visible. In John Paul's case, one notes his vigorous efforts to avert war between nation states, his theological defense of human rights and human dignity, and his critique of both communism and consumer capitalism.

While the pope's record on ecumenism is mixed, he has continued to keep doors open and to encourage dialogue. "We must force ourselves to overcome every barrier with incessant prayer, with persevering dialogue and with a fraternal and concrete cooperation in favor of the poorest and most needy," he told an audience of pilgrims during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

On social issues, Graham has by nature been extremely cautious, never straying too far from the conservative side of middle-American opinion. Yet over the course of his

career he took on issues such as race, social development, world hunger and nuclear proliferation, thereby nudging his followers toward the kind of wholistic concern that has since become common in mainstream evangelicalism.

Perhaps his greatest social achievements derive from the rules he set for his popular mass crusades. While mainline church leaders endorsed the civil rights movement, Graham quietly rejected segregation at his revivals.

And on the ecumenical front, as mainline churches were forging interdenominational ties in the 1950s and '60s, Graham used his stadium events to extend interdenominational cooperation in another way. He insisted that he would work with anyone who would work with him, including mainline Protestants and, eventually, Catholics. That decision was a major step in marginalizing fundamentalism and creating the style of a new evangelicalism.

While the essays in this issue are not uncritical, they are a form of tribute to two figures—while they are still with us—whose integrity of faith and untiring articulation of it has done much to shape the religious landscape.